DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 253 RC 017 368

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TITLE	La Asociacion Hispano-Americana de Madres y Esposas: Tucson's Mexican American Women in World War II.
PUB DATE	85
NOTE	15p.; In: La Mexicana-Chicana, Renato Rosaldo Lecture Series 1983-84. Tucson AZ, Mexican American Studies and Research Center, University of Arizona, 1985. v1, p5-18. For related document, see RC 017 367.
PUB TYPE	Historical Materials (060) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Action; *Community Organizations; Community Support; *Females; Local History; *Mexican American History; Mexican Americans; *Patriotism; Social History; Social Organizations; World War Ii
IDENTIFIERS	*Arizona (Tucson); *Chicanas; Chicano Studies

ABSTRACT

The contributions made during World War II by Mexican-American women on the home front have not been recognized in their proper historical perspective. Like their Anglo counterparts, these women took up the responsibilities left by their men and worked to support the war effort. In 1944 the Mexican-American women of Tucson formed La Asociacion Hispano-Americana de Madres y Esposas. Its functions were similar to those of other patriotic community organizations during this period, but the Asociacion had two unique goals: to lift the morale of Tucson's Chicano soldiers away from home and to build a recreation center for the exclusive use of the Mexican-American soldier. The organization published and distributed the "Chatter," a newspaper carrying notices of events in the Mexican-American community and news about Chicano soldiers. The newspaper was sent to soldiers to keep them in touch with home. Proceeds from local sales of "Chatter" were intended for the construction of the recreation center. In 16 months Asociacion members sold over one million dollars worth of war bonds and war stamps. Members also collected clothing for the Red Cross, gathered scrap metal and foil, planted victory gardens, and provided child care services for mothers performing war-related services. Although land was purchased, the recreation center was never built. With the end of the war, membership and interest declined sharply. Nevertheless, the Asociacion continued to perform community service until it disbanded in 1976. This paper contains 31 footnotes. (SV)

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LA ASOCIACIÓN HISPANO-AMERICANA DE MADRES Y ESPOSAS: Tucson's Mexican American Women In World War II

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It was wartime — 1944. The popular songs heard on the radio then were such sentimental favorites as "I'll Be Seeing You," "I'll Get By," and "I'll Walk Alone." Other catchy tunes heard were "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?" and "Milk Man Keep Those Bottles Quiet!"

That year, a war bond drive advertisement in a Tucson newspaper declared:

> Women of America, It's Up to You! Our enemies have boasted that American women are pampered, luxury-loving morons who would be of no help to our fighting men at war. But they were wrong. American women everywhere are doing a bang-up job — in the service, in industry, in business, on the farm, and in the home . . . But you've got to do your full duty by our boys at the front by keeping up your regular purchase of War Bonds . . . Women of America — It's up to you![1]

The contribution of women to the American war effort is well-documented.[2] One only needs to look through the popular magazines of the period to see the many photographs of Anglo working women dressed in their industrial uniforms, railroad overalls, or defense plant jumpsuits doing their part for the war effort. The story of their heroism, integrity, and dedication has been the theme of numerous scholarly and popular works. However, the contributions made by Mexican American women to this same war effort have yet to be reported or recognized in

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their proper historical perspective. These women also experienced war's daily trials, and like their Anglo counterparts, took up the responsibilities left by their men.

Various sectors of Tucson's Mexican American community readily supported the war effort almost immediately after Pearl Harbor. Mutual aid and benefit organizations such as the *Alianza Hispano-Americana* and the *Leñadores del Mundo* helped sell war bonds. Religious organizations within the Mexican Catholic parishes, such as *El Centro Club* and the *Club San Vicente* added their support by collecting scrap metal. Social and service clubs such as the *Club Latino*, the *Club Treinta*, and *Club Anáhuac* also supported the Allied cause through various ways.[3]

While these were mainly either male or female-male clubs, other Mexican American women in the community played an equally important part in the Tucson war effort. Some eagerly responded to a suggestion made by three prominent Tucsonans, Rosalío Ronquillo, Ricardo Fierro, and Armando Alfaro to form a league of women to join in the war effort and help support the fight for freedom. Ronquillo was a pharmacist with the Walgreen Drug Company, Fierro was editor of Tucson's Spanish-language newspaper, *El Tucsonense*, and Alfaro was a popular college student at the University of Arizona.

The idea of women "fighting the war along with the boys overseas" captured Rose Rodríguez's enthusiasm. Rodríguez, a secretary at city hall and a member of the *Junta Patriótica*, a Mexican American community service organization composed of both men and women, was more than eager to offer her time to help in the formation of such a group. Her willingness to organize the women was shared by her friends and other Mexican American women.[4]

News articles printed in *El Tucsonense* between 14 March

and 24 March 1944 announced the first meeting of the women, which was actually held on Tuesday, 21 March. At that meeting the group chose the name *El Club de Madres y Esposas* (Club of Mothers and Wives).[5]

Many of the women at the meeting had sons or other family members in the military. Their ages ranged "from young to old," and they represented various socio-economic backgrounds. Many were young homemakers, others were working class women who toiled as section hand workers on the Southern Pacific Railroad. Some women had paraprofessional office jobs such as that of secretaries or sales clerks; still others were much older women who maintained households while their eldest sons were away.[6] Club membership, however, was not strictly limited to married women or to the mothers of servicemen. All women, including Anglo American women, who wanted to participate in the group were encouraged to do so.[7]

The functions of the organization were similar to those of any other patriotic organization during this period. Yet, the Mexican American women also had some unique and distinct goals from the Anglo women who had their own organizations. Two of their specific goals were to lift the morale of the Mexican American soldiers who were away from the Tucson area, and to build a recreation center for the exclusive use of the Mexican American soldier. The center was to serve as a symbol of the patriotism, loyalty, and contribution of the Mexican American to the war effort. It should be understood that these women did not purposely segregate themselves from the other kinds of wartime activities organized by Anglo women; rather, they felt the need to reinforce that cultural, emotional, and traditional sentiment commonly shared among Mexican American women. Through their own organization these

women could unite most of the Mexican American women in their community and help them deal with the hardships of the war.

Within a month after their initial meeting in March, the women elected officers of the organization. The officers were:

President:	Carmen Ríos
Vice President:	Beatriz Warner
Secretary:	Rose Rodríguez
Treasurer:	Emma Vergara
1st Chair:	Mercy León
2nd Chair:	Lupe Peralta
3rd Chair:	Carmen Alvarez
4th Chair:	Edilia Garcia[8]

They also changed their organization's name from *El Club de Madres y Esposas* to *La Asociación Hispano-Americana de Madres y Esposas*. The name change served to affirm their intention to be viewed as a formal organization with clear-cut goals and objectives, rather than to be regarded as another women's club whose functions were merely social.

Meetings were held every Tuesday evening in the meeting rooms of the building owned by the *Alianza Hispano-Americana*.[9] Members volunteered to maintain daily office hours there between the hours of 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. in order to meet and talk with other women who were interested in the goals of the organization. New members were welcomed. Dues were quickly established at $.50 a month. Women who could read wartime literature such as information advertisements, news bulletins, or military pronouncements printed in the *Arizona Citizen*, the *Arizona Daily Star*, or the *Tucson Daily Citizen*, served as translators for those Spanish-speaking women who sought information about the war abroad, or for news at home. They

wrote letters or filled out government forms for those in the community whose writing skills in English were limited.

Soon the women began participating in homefront activities commonly shared by the rest of the Tucson community. Their early activities focused upon the sale of war bonds and stamps. They sold war bonds in front of the J.C. Penney store on Congress Street at 6th Avenue — which was then downtown — on Saturday 15 April 1944. They drew attention to their table by providing music and entertainment for the shoppers and those who stopped to buy bonds.

Lupe Alvarez and her cousins danced some favorite Mexican folk dances. Alicia López and Socorro Granillo sang various songs in Spanish, accompanied by local musicians popular within the Mexican community, such as Lorenzo Villa and his group.[10] At the community's annual event, *El Cinco de Mayo*, a holiday which commemorates Mexico's military victory over France at Puebla in 1862, the officers and members of the Asociación operated several food booths where they sold bonds, along with home cooked *tacos, enchiladas, tamales,* and *tostadas*. During that weekend the Asociación members sold over $30,000 worth of bonds and stamps.[11]

Encouraged by their tremendous success in the sale of the war bonds, the members became more involved in other kinds of home front activities. They collected clothing for the Red Cross to be sent to war-torn, devastated countries. They also sent clothing to social service agencies in Mexico.[12]

The women combed their neighborhoods for scrap metal. They saved foil from candy, gum, and cigarette wrappers, and turned in large quantities of the foil to collection centers. The hómemaker became just as impor-

tant to the war effort as the women who worked in a defense job. Mexican American women planted and tended their own "victory" gardens. They learned to bottle and preserve vegetables and fruits. They saved waste fats and turned in their collection of fats and grease, which yielded glycerin for high explosives. They collected tin cans — the tin went into armaments and cans for the soldiers' C-rations.

The women maintained their household equipment in efficient shape and decreased fuel consumption. With an increasing demand for paper by the government, the supply of paper at home was reduced. They then salvaged old magazines and newspapers. They made things last, or else they did without. The Asociación offered childcare services in the members' homes for the mothers who were performing war-related services, such as donating blood and bandages to the Red Cross, or gathering food for the U.S.O., and for those women who performed duties required of them as air raid wardens. Clearly, the women proved their resourcefulness in the home.[13]

A successful money-making effort for the Asociación was the publication, distribution, and sale of the organization's newspaper, the *Chatter*. Edited by one of the founders of the Asociación [Rose Rodríguez], the four-page newspaper was dedicated to the Mexican American soldiers. *Chatter* was published every second and fourth Sunday of each month, and "all revenues from the sale of the newspapers were to be used exclusively for the construction of the recreation center."[14] Initial efforts produced mimeographed copies of the newspaper, with the masthead showing a drawing of two women talking to each other on the telephone.

Rodríguez, who was employed as a secretary in the treasurer's office at city hall, sought and received permis-

sion from her employers to type the newspaper stencils in her office during her lunch breaks, and whenever she finished her work at the end of the day.[15] Items were written in an informal manner, much in the same way one would talk to an old friend, a neighbor, or a relative. Notices of events in the Mexican American community were printed in English and in Spanish. The *Chatter* sold for five cents. The newspaper listed names of Mexican American soldiers killed, wounded, or listed as missing in action, promotions and medals earned, and the comings and goings of local Mexican American soldiers from basic training camps to their assigned units. Feature stories focused on those soldiers home on furlough. Other features included birthday greetings, news about births, family activities, sport scores, marriages, and other information from home. Tucson's Mexican American women who enlisted in the WACs (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps), or joined the Waves (the Marine Corp's women's auxiliary) were also recognized for their military service and patriotism.

The first issue of *Chatter* was distributed on 11 June 1944 and was dedicated to the "valiant Fathers who were fighting to preserve our democracy."[16] The publication and sale of the *Chatter* became an important event in the Mexican American community. More professionally produced issues were later printed at the newspaper plant of *El Tucsonense*. Copies were produced on better quality of paper, and the issues began including photographs of the soldiers mentioned or featured in the stories.

Other segments of the Mexican American community became involved in the newspaper's production and distribution. The *Club Latino*, a men's social community group, paid all the expenses necessary for the printing of the newspaper.[17] Copies were sold by Mexican American

merchants who owned or managed department stores, gas stations, barber shops, tailor shops, grocery markets, or other small businesses. It was not unusual for individual members of local Mexican American families to buy several copies and send them to Anglo American friends and neighbors in the armed forces.[18]

The information printed in the *Chatter* was obtained from the *Arizona Daily Star* and the *Tucson Daily Citizen*. As its editor and publisher, Rodríguez "would buy both newspapers every day and would look through them and cut out all the news" she thought the soldiers would like and put them in different categories. She put the clippings in envelopes in their respective categories and compared the clippings with the *Star* and *Citizen* to see that she was not duplicating the news.[19]

Two issues of the *Chatter* were printed in Spanish at the request of the Spanish-speaking mothers of the organization. On September 24, 1944, and again on August 17, 1945, *Chisme* was printed in Spanish because the "elderly ladies wanted to know what the paper was about; what kind of information their sons were reading." Not too long after each of these issues was printed, the soldiers wrote to Rodríguez and requested they be printed again in English. They apparently had difficulty reading the paper written in Spanish.[20] The Mexican American soldiers had been educated in the English language in the Tucson public school system and had not acquired a formal reading and writing knowledge of Spanish, even through they spoke Spanish in the home.

On several occasions, Rodríguez received letters from the soldiers who encouraged her to continue sending them the *Chatter*. The newspaper not only bolstered the GI's spirits, but also kept them in touch with home and their loved ones. *Chatter* became an important wartime tool to

combat against some of the soldier's enemies: loneliness, fear, homesickness, and depression. The messages found in the newspaper were clear: Mexican American soldiers were serving their country honorably; and they too were Americans fighting for America. "The boys wanted to know *everything*," Rodríguez says now, many years later. "They wanted to know who had been killed, wounded, or listed as missing."[21]

It is clear then that through their issues of *Chatter*, the women of the *La Asociación Hispano-Americana de Madres y Esposas* contributed to the war effort by uplifting the morale of the Mexican American soldier.[22]

The women continued with their activities in the rest of the Mexican American community. They arranged for a special Sunday mass to be conducted on 30 July 1944 in the San Agustín Cathedral in honor of Tucson's Mexican American servicemen and women. The community responded in full force.[23] The standing-room-only crowd in the church reassured the Asociación's members that their community was indeed united, and that their contributions and their sacrifices to the war effort were not being ignored.

While the organization was resourceful in the sale and distribution of the *Chatter*, it became even more successful in the sale of war bonds and stamps in its own community neighborhoods. The women's hard work in the sale of "E" war bonds for the Fifth War Loan Drive was lauded by the United States Treasury Department on 5 August 1944.[24] The women sold over $15,000 in bonds for the War Finance Program, at picnics, and church *fiestas*. For this, the Asociación was presented a handsome certificate of achievement by the federal government.[25]

Their enthusiasm served them well, and never weakened. In seven months, from 14 March to 13 October

1944, the group sold another $444,877 in war bonds.[26] By July, 1945, the women sold another $632,177 in stamps.[27] Through their hard work and numerous bond sales, the members of the Asociación sold over $1 million worth of war bonds and stamps in less than one year. Many of the purchases of these bonds and stamps were made by members of the Mexican American community.

During the height of its activity, the Asociación incorporated into a non-profit entity and purchased land on which to build the recreation center it so eagerly sought to erect. The money needed to pay property taxes for the land came from the group's treasury and from the sales of the *Chatter*.[28]

By August 1945, however, many Mexican American soldiers began to return home. This signaled the steady decline of the organization. Some of the group's most active participants soon resigned their membership in the organization as their families were reunited again. Husbands, sons, and brothers were home. With the war over, there was no longer a need for the mass distribution of *Chatter*. There were also no more war bonds and stamps to sell at community events or gatherings.

Nevertheless some of the women kept the organization active, despite the fewer numbers in the group. Their goal remained the same — that of building a recreation center for the Mexican American soldier. The women also remained busy helping families readjust to postwar life.

In August 1945, the Asociación had only $2,700 in its treasury coffer.[29] While interest in the Asociación decreased over the postwar years, the activity of its leaders remained constant. Eventually, the demands of the organization on the few members became too much to handle. Twenty years after the group began, the Arizona Corporation Commission revoked the group's non-profit certifica-

tion in 1964, citing inactivity for the action. Members had at times neglected to submit annual reports. But the Asociación struggled along, continuing its effort to remain a viable and strong Mexican American community organization by helping the needy. In 1971 they again filed their reincorporation papers with the Arizona Corporation Commission.[30]

Records do not show why the recreation center was not built after the war. It may have been too expensive to do so, and perhaps the treasury had been pretty much depleted by the property taxes the group had to pay on the land it owned. Or perhaps the Asociación members no longer felt the center was necessary. The veterans were too pre-occupied with finding jobs and putting their lives back together again to be concerned about a recreation center. Other factors were to account for the inactivity of the Asociación over the years. As the members grew older, illness and lack of mobility kept them from being as active in the organization. Death also took its toll.

When they realized they were the only ones attending the frequent meetings in 1976, the four remaining members of the board, Lucía M. Fresno, Dolores C. Delgado, Luz M. López, and Juanita L. Loroña voted to dissolve the organization. They had been members since 1945, and they had served both their organization and their community well. They donated $1,250 they had in their account to several community agencies. They gave the Saint Vincent de Paul Societies of Saint Margaret's Catholic Church and the Holy Family Catholic Church each $225. "Nosotros", an information and referral service for the needy, received $300 from the women; and El Rio Neighborhood Center Library was given $500. The corner lot, once the site of the proposed recreation center, was donated to the Saint Elizabeth of Hungary clinic.[31]

The Asociación ceased to exist, but the organization's contributions remain as a testimony to the patriotism and hard work of the Mexican American community as a whole. Mexican Americans in Tucson needed their own heroes and heroines—men and women who could personalize and simplify the larger wartime struggle. The women of the Asociación proved to be these homefront heroines, ever challenging their community to do its share to advance the Allied cause, while sustaining through cultural and social activities the morale of that same community. They remain forever one of the symbols of the Mexican American contribution to the war effort.

NOTES

1. *El Tucsonense*, 21 January 1944, p.4.

2. For an analysis of the role played by women defense workers, see Chester W. Gregory, *Women in Defense Work During World War II*, (New York: Exposition Press, 1974). The bibliography in Gregory's study is helpful. Karen Anderson's *Wartime Women: Sex roles, Family relations, and the Status of Women During World War II*, (Westport,Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981) discusses the reasons why women in defense work took over those jobs formerly held exclusively by men. Gregory and Anderson, however, fail to analyze the important roles played by Hispanic women in their communities during this same wartime period.

3. For a social analysis of the Mexican American community in Tucson, Arizona between the years 1945 and 1947, see Harry T. Getty, *Interethnic Relationships in the Community of Tucson*, (New York: Arno Press, 1976). The newspaper, *El Tucsonense*, should be considered a major primary source of vital information for learning the daily activities of the Mexican American during the war period in Tucson.

4. Rose Rodriguez Caballero, interview with author, Tucson, Arizona, 18 January 1985.

5. See the following articles "Club de madres mexicanas de soldados que sirven a E.U. se forma en Tucson," *El Tucsonense*, 14 March 1944,

p. 1; "Madres y esposas hispano-Americanas de Tucson," *El Tucsonense*, 21 March 1944, p.1.

6. Interview with Rose Rodríguez Caballero.

7. *Ibid.* Rose Rodríguez Caballero recalls that a "Mrs. Parker" was "active and helpful", but could not remember if there were other Anglo American women in the organization. She does remember, however, that the members of the organization frequently conversed with each other in Spanish, even though the women were bilingual.

8. "Saludando a los oficiales y soldados hispano-Americanos y a las madres y esposas y familiares de ellos, de Tucson," *El Tucsonense*, 7 April 1944, p.2.

9. The Alianza Hispano-Americana was a fraternal insurance society that was first organized in 1894 in Tucson. The Alianza offered low cost life insurance and social activities to its members. Although the Alianza headquarters remained in Tucson, it soon organized local lodges throughout Arizona, California, Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Wyoming and Mexico. For an excellent historical account of the Alianza, see Kaye Lynn Briegel, *Alianza Hispano-Americana, 1894-1965: A Mexican American Fraternal Insurance Society*, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Xerox University Microfilms, 1974).

10. See the articles: "Madres y esposas hispano-Americanas," *El Tucsonense*, 18 April 1944, p. 1; and "Hoy junta de madres y esposas," *El Tucsonense*, 18 April 1944, p.1.

11. "Junta, hoy, de Madres y Esposas," *El Tucsonense*, 25 April 1944, p.1.

12. *Chatter*, 20 August 1944.

13. Interview with Rose Rodríguez Caballero.

14. *Chatter*, 20 August 1944; *Chismes*, 24 September 1944. This notice was printed in each issue of both editions. It most often appeared on the front page of the newspaper.

15. "Old, 'Little Cart' Lives On," *Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson), 24 June 1976, sec. C., p.1. Also, Interview with Rose Rodríguez Caballero.

16. *Chatter*, 11 June 1944, p.1.

17. *Chatter*, 4 March 1945, p.1.

18. Interview with Rose Rodríguez Caballero.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.* (Rose Rodríguez Caballero)

22. *Ibid.*

23. "Triunfa otra vez la legión de madres!!," *El Tucsonense*, 1 August 1944, p.1.
24. *Chatter*, 20 August 1944, p.4.
25. "Triunfa otra vez la legión de madres!!," *El Tucsonense*, 1 August 1944, p.1.
26. "Las madres y esposas han vendido $444,877 de bonos de guerra hasta ahora!!," *El Tucsonense*, 13 October 1944, p.1.
27. *Chatter*, 28 July 1945, p.3.
28. "Old 'Little Cart' Lives On," *Arizona Daily Star*, 24 June 1976, sec. C., p.1.
29. *Chatter*, 17 August 1945, p.1.
30. "Old 'Little Cart' Lives On," *Arizona Daily Star*, 24 June 1976, sec. C., p.1.
31. *Ibid.*